

Update airways to handle coming passenger boom

by *The Detroit News*

The number of airline passengers will double in the next decade or so and an upgraded air traffic control system is needed to handle the surge.

One projection shows up to 1.2 billion air travelers a year, all scrambling to squeeze through an antiquated federal control structure that's already blamed for delays.

The number of take-offs and landings will increase and, without traffic control upgrades, gridlock looms. The Federal Aviation Administration has launched an innovative solution - a new air traffic system called NextGen, based on the global positioning system - a radical departure from radar-driven systems. In the full version of NextGen, cockpits will have monitors showing pilots pretty much the same picture of surrounding traffic, as do traditional controllers. Pilots will have a lot more information on other planes in their vicinity, including warnings of potential conflicts. GPS is more precise than radar, allowing more planes to share a given amount of airspace. That means a system that can handle more traffic - a key to reducing delays, the FAA says.

Existing funding is enough to keep NextGen moving toward completion, and the FAA should keep on the upgrade track.

However, one related hang-up is how to make air travel fees equitable. U.S. airline passengers now unfairly carry the brunt of the cost, says the Air Transport Association, which represents major airlines.

Airlines and their customers generated more than 90 percent of taxes and fees that went into the federal airport and airway trust fund even though airlines accounted for 73 percent of air traffic control costs, said James Whitehurst, former chief operating officer of Delta Airlines, in recent testimony before Congress.

On the other hand, business jets and other non-airline flights contribute 6 percent of trust fund revenues and drove an estimated 14 percent to 19 percent of air traffic costs, Whitehurst said.

More and more companies find corporate jets attractive, partly because of relatively good economic times and partly to reduce the hassle associated with post-Sept. 11 security. There are 10,000 more high performance general aviation aircraft than commercial U.S. airliners, according to industry data.

On top of that, the number of small business jets is expected to grow, partly driven by a generation of

cheaper aircraft dubbed VLF (very light jets). In the air, such jets often require the same amount of attention from air traffic control, as do large airliners.

The airlines are right to ask that passengers pay only their fair share of taxes and fees.

Congress should stop dawdling and put the matter on the front burner. Air travel is an essential engine of the U.S. economy. Modernizing the federal control system should keep pace with projected growth.

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